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The following article was prepared by the Group Ministry of the East Harlem Protestant Parish of New York City, U.S.A.

THE CHURCH BECOMES GOOD NEWS
-An Experiment in East Harlem-

In 1948 the area known as East Harlem in New York City was a terribly overcrowded, rundown area whose streets were lined with unbroken rows of dingy tenement houses. It was an area going through the throes, as it had so often before in its history, of assimilating new immigrant groups - Negroes from the South, great waves of Spanish-speaking people from the American possession in the Caribbean, Puerto Rico. These joined earlier immigrant groups who had now become "old residents" of the area, such as Italian-Americans. It was an area of dynamic population movements, with people "on the way up" trying to leave, and those sliding down the economic and social ladder coming in to achieve the anonymous security of an area like East Harlem.

It was an area which was, paradoxically, underchurched and overchurched. There were several large Roman Catholic churches which were pretty inactive. Traditional Protestantism had largely abandoned the neighbourhood, leaving only a handful of small congregations who were dying out with varying degrees of rapidity. But there were literally hundreds of small "storefront" churches scattered through the area, chiefly of the Pentecostal and Spiritualist variety. Whatever dynamic religious life there was in East Harlem was largely a form of escapism.

After making a survey of East Harlem for the New York City Mission Society, a group of young Protestant ministers felt called to come to the area to begin a church which would be faithful to the Gospel, presenting its demands for Christian witness and responsibility in all areas of community life. Since the storefront was the symbol of meaningful religion for more people on the tenement blocks, the first church of East Harlem Protestant Parish was begun in an abandoned butcher shop. From that beginning, to

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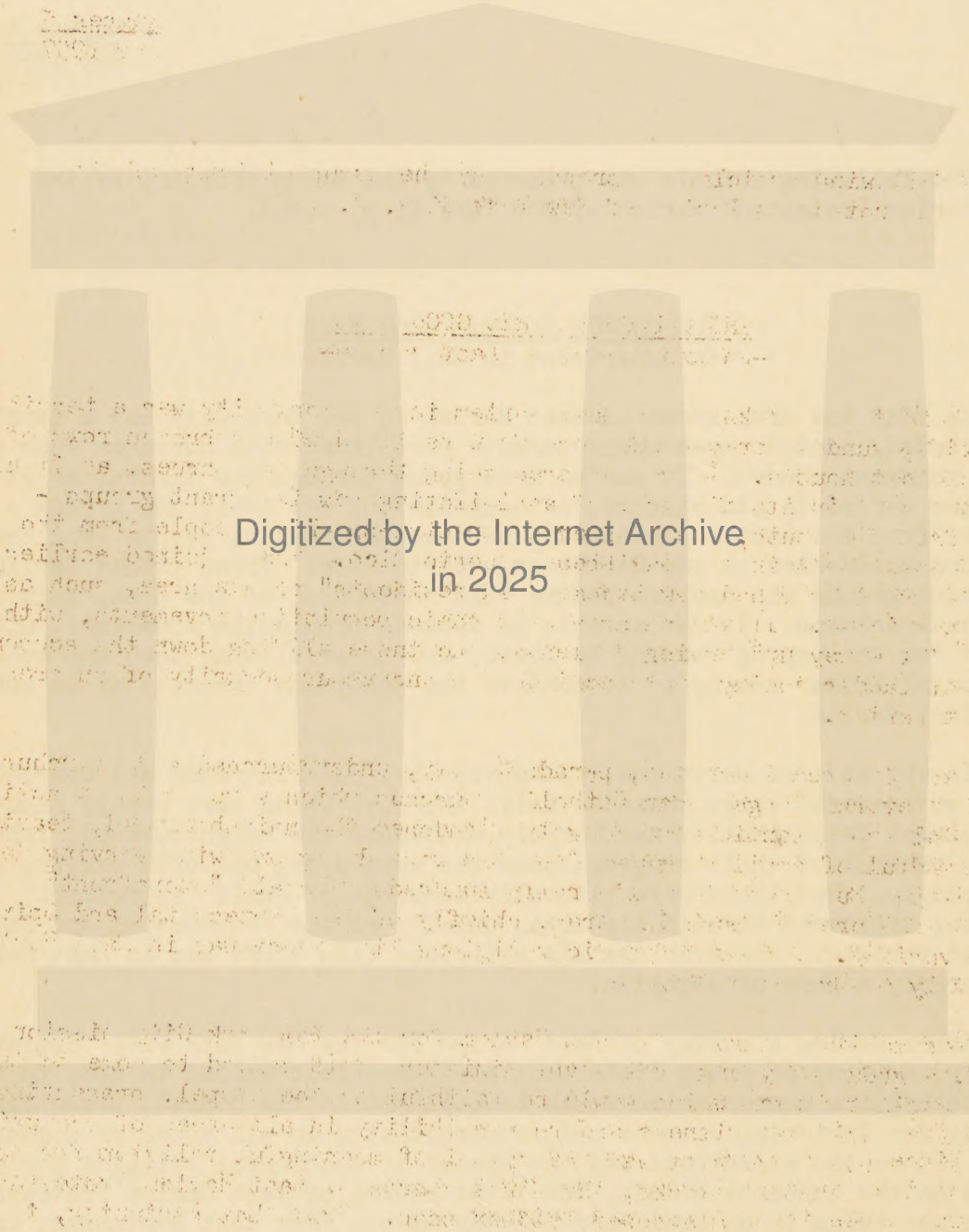

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skip over a great deal of history, was developed a Parish of four churches, served by a staff of twelve ordained ministers and several laymen who seek to use the varied services of the church as means of evangelistic outreach.

The ministerial staff of the Parish, with a few additional lay members, constitutes what we call a Group Ministry. The Group Ministry has no head in the traditional staff sense but only a chairman who presides at meetings and who is elected for six month periods. The staff is divided among the Parish's four churches so that each person has definite local church responsibility. In addition, however, each member of the staff pursues his own interests and becomes "the expert" for the entire group. This means that we are able to cover many more areas of activity than can the normal church staff because each person on our staff does concentrate on a limited number of specialized interests. The group is bound together by four "disciplines", namely, economic (under which each person is paid according to need rather than seniority within the group), religious, vocational and political.

From the very beginning the Parish has been supported by several Protestant denominations, currently seven. One of the churches is denominationally related - Ascension Presbyterian. Discussions are now underway with representatives of other communions looking toward the building of new churches in the East Harlem area which will be related to denominations but continue to be administered as a part of East Harlem Protestant Parish and served by the Group Ministry.

The construction of permanent church buildings has been made more pressing by the changing physical appearance of East Harlem. Slowly the city and state have become more acutely conscious of their responsibilities to the people of this area. One very visible result has been the leveling of whole blocks of tenement buildings and the construction of large "skyscraper" housing projects. The sites of these housing projects - as are many of East Harlem's blocks still - were occupied by unbroken rows of dingy apartment buildings averaging four or five stories. The new projects attempt to house the same number of people by building much taller buildings which not only can provide larger apartments for families but also leave enough space on the ground for playgrounds, parking lots, and even here and there a plot of grass and a few trees.

Projected plans call for the building of many more projects, leaving within a few years only a handful of blocks unchanged. Already several of the Parish's storefront churches have been torn down; others will be within the next few years. In the meantime, the Parish has been confronted by the existence of housing projects and the need to evangelize them with the resources presently available, even as we develop new resources. The burden of this article, then, is not the history and working of the Parish per se, but the methods it has used in tackling the problem of the big public housing project.

Take, for example, George Washington Houses. This large project is currently only half occupied; the north half is scheduled to be opened this spring. Some visitation had been done in two buildings of the project, and last summer a seminary student was engaged to complete the "census" of the occupied buildings. His work was to engage in systematic pastoral calling on the families in the project to let them know that the church was here and was concerned about their problems and needs. He was also to extend an invitation to these people to unite with the Christian Fellowship which existed at our 104th Street Church.

From the intensive calling which already had been done, it was clear that there were a significant number of unchurched Christians, both Protestants and Catholics, whom the Parish did not know and who probably did not know the Parish. The newness of the project offered a favourable situation in which to conduct a survey. The tenants had been settled in their apartments for a little more than one year, and there had been few changes in occupants. While many families were still very far from feeling East Harlem to be their community, they at least possessed a "working" knowledge of the neighbourhood. The accurate compiling of names and addresses was facilitated by the mail box lists and apartment door name tags which still re ained, for the most part, free from the deface ent of petty vandalism.

The first task was to gather these names and addresses and then to make a notebook containing sections for each building, with pages divided into eight horizontal columns to correspond with the number of apartments on each floor. A card file and a graph of calls made were also arranged in this manner because this breakdown facilitated learning the location and "geographical" interrelationship of families. The purpose of the notebook was to provide a convenient tabulation of pertinent basic data about each family in a form which would show an entire floor at one glance. The visitor also found this notebook useful in planning his calling. (The graph of calls made, incidentally, was to provide an easy means of seeing whether the student was distributing his time among all the families to whom he had an obligation.)

The card file was kept on all unchurched Christian families. On it the visitor made notes after each visit, which gave him and us a running account of what took place with a particular family throughout the summer. Since the student knew his work would end when he returned to school, he attempted to provide sufficiently detailed information so that our full-time staff would have background information to use in making follow-up visits. "I tried to refrain from value judgments which would prejudice the relationship between the family and the person who followed up my calling," the student wrote in his report.

On all records, red pencil was used to call attention to Spanish-speaking families. This was done to make it easier to locate these families who represent a special problem and obligation for the predominantly English-speaking permanent Parish staff.

At the end of the summer, the student summarized his data and placed most of the unchurched Christian families in three categories expressing his judgment regarding their prospective relationship to the Parish. The three categories, symbols, and definitions used were as follows:

XXX	Prospect	An individual or family who have given evidence through thought, word, and deed of accepting Christ as their Saviour and uniting with His Church.
XX	Possible Prospect	An individual or family who have expressed the desire to accept Christ as Saviour and to come to His Church, but have not yet done so with any regularity.
X	Vague Prospect	An individual or family whose life is so self-centered and/or disorganized as to make commitment to Christ and His Church extremely difficult.

These summaries were then included in the notebook. The symbol of the appropriate value judgment category and date of placement were entered in the "comments" section of the notebook page. Total prospects for all categories for all buildings were 155 families.

Several facts were apparent from the statistical summary.

1. The project population was well-balanced racially. (Hopefully integration of this type will reduce the tension between Negro and Puerto Rican which has troubled East Harlem since World War II.)

2. The Roman Catholic Church has been doing a better job than the Protestant Churches in reaching project families.

3. Puerto Rican residents in the project have, for the most part, gained a working knowledge of English.

4. The number of families with whom the Parish should make an effort to have contact is only about one-third of the total. Of the other two-thirds, some were related to other churches, a number were simply not interested in the Parish.

One more thing which needs to be said about this particular survey is the effect which it had upon the seminarian who conducted it. The following brief extracts from his report are illuminating in this regard:

"For myself, this last summer in East Harlem was extremely interesting and worthwhile. The most formidable barriers that I encountered were those of indifference rather than distrust or fear. For the most part, I was warmly received as a pastor and friend in these homes... Because the number of families that I visited was large, I encountered a wide range of people and situations, each calling for analysis, and, very often, action on my part in response to them. This summer's calling has given me very valuable experience in pastoral calling...

"Probably the most deeply moving experiences of the summer for me were those in which I was received in complete trust by troubled families. In several homes, I was the trusted 'pastor' of the family and was told about the family's problems... For myself, I found that such a counseling situation was fraught with tensions. To be of any help to the person, I had to respect the uniqueness of this person and his problems, refraining from recasting his problems in the image of my own. I wanted the love and trust of these people and yet it was my duty, I felt, to help them to develop the true independence which comes from the recognition of dependence upon God, commitment to Him and the responsible use of the freedom given to that individual by God - not to make them dependent upon me."

But once a survey has been made, then what? We can draw more fully upon our experiences in another, older housing project in our Parish, East River Houses. A survey similar to that described above had been conducted in 1955 and the information summarized. Then a member of the staff of our 106th Street Church (Ascension Presbyterian) would go to a building, call on each family listed on his report sheet, and arrange a date and hour for a pastoral call. (This is a concession to a society in which both parents may work and difficulty experienced in finding an hour when both might be at home.) At the appropriate time a pastoral call was made upon each family.

It must be made clear, however, that not everyone expressing an interest in the church during the survey was immediately reached through pastoral calls. To begin with, it proved impossible to bring the church to all these families through pastoral calling because of insufficient staff. Nevertheless, this church has continued to expand its outreach to include those families to whom it knows it must minister because of known and immediate need, while at the same time ministering to those already within its membership.

In attempting this type of evangelistic mission in the community, the church itself has not remained unchanged. Indeed, it had to face many very serious problems within its own life. Numerous new factors had to be considered in regard to the various activities within the church to which it was hoped new persons might become related. Bible study meetings, gathering twice each week in different apartments throughout the housing project itself, have appeared to be one of the most effective means for bringing these new individuals within the life of the church. By and large these groups have proved highly important in the life of the church precisely because it is here, more often than not, that those people who are already within the church meet those who have only recently been touched by the Gospel.

Indeed, it is fair to say that though this evangelistic work was initially instituted and carried on by the church staff, it has now become a matter central to the life of the whole congregation. Though the same Gospel is proclaimed as has been proclaimed throughout the history of this local church, it has somehow taken on a deeper and more vital quality as the congregation as a whole has gradually come to understand itself not only as a worshipping community but as a community responsible for bringing the Gospel to those persons outside its own bounds as well.

Life in the projects can be very much more pleasant and enjoyable than the old tenements. New homes provide some incentive to keep things neat and clean. Better educational and recreational facilities can help make a more disciplined life. But there are also many forces involved in these projects which create as many problems for people as did the tenements. By eliminating the top 20% of the old population because of too much income and by excluding the bottom 20% because of almost complete disintegration in family and emotional life, the projects have a much more homogeneous population than did the tenements. But this may not only be a virtue; it may mean that great pressure is exerted for social conformity. And certainly there is no more necessity for companionship, for real community in the new houses than previously existed. This means that people still can hide, can remain anonymous.

Improvement in economic status, therefore, does not necessarily mean that life becomes full and meaningful. The church in East Harlem, whether ministering to the tenements or the housing projects still has a great challenge in witnessing to the love of God in Christ, in sharing in so far as it can the burdens of the people, and in welcoming them into that Christian community which enables them really to find themselves.